

## EPHEMERAL SOCIALITIES: SOCIAL NAVIGATION AMONG YOUNG DANES

*Sociabilidades efímeras: la navegación social entre los jóvenes daneses*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article analyses how young people get together in the spatial, temporal and social complexity of urban space. We suggest the term *ephemeral urban socialities* to understand how young people construct alternative socialities that are not embedded within an institutional mode of thinking or a formalised social setting. Based on anthropological fieldwork and empirical material generated in the Danish cities of Aarhus and Horsens by Anne-Lene Sand, we frame the analysis in a context where the development of urban space minimises social places that young people can define by and for themselves. This article investigates how young people come together socially in a context that seems to be highly regulated and planned, but that from another perspective is uncertain (Highmore, 2005; Lefebvre, 1994) and open to ludic interpretation (Stevens, 2007). The material is discussed through the lens of the Danish anthropologist Henrik Vigh's concept of social navigation (2006, 2009) to understand young people's mobile and changing social formations in the urban context. This article contributes knowledge about modern urban socialities in medium-sized northern European cities that, in the case of youth formations, cannot be described as groups or as territorial, but that are constructed through the desire to meet with "like-minded individuals".

**KEYWORDS:** mobility, social formations, ephemeral, communities, social practice.



**RESUMEN:** Este artículo analiza las maneras de reunirse de los jóvenes en las ciudades danesas de Aarhus y Horsens, teniendo en cuenta las complejidades espaciales, temporales y sociales del espacio urbano. Sugerimos el término de «sociabilidades urbanas efímeras» para entender cómo se construye un estar juntos alternativo, fuera de marcos institucionales o sociales formales. Basándonos en el trabajo de campo antropológico de Anne-Lene Sand, nos centramos en un contexto en el que el desarrollo del espacio urbano parece haber disminuido las oportunidades para que los jóvenes definan y creen espacios para sí mismos. Este artículo se centra en las formas de reunirse en un contexto que a simple vista parece altamente regulado y planeado, pero que desde otra perspectiva es incierto (Highmore, 2005; Lefebvre, 1994) y está abierto a la reinterpretación lúdica (Stevens, 2007). El material se discute a través del concepto de «navegación social» del antropólogo danés Henrik Vigh (2006, 2009), para entender las formaciones sociales móviles y cambiantes de los jóvenes en el contexto urbano. Buscamos contribuir al conocimiento sobre las sociabilidades juveniles urbanas modernas que no pueden ser descritas como grupales o territoriales, pero que en cambio se construyen a través del deseo de encontrarse con personas afines.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** movilidad, formaciones sociales, efímero, comunidades, práctica social.

**RESUM:** Aquest article analitza les maneres de reunir-se dels joves a les ciutats daneses d'Aarhus i Horsens, tenint en compte les complexitats espacials, temporals i socials de l'espai urbà. Suggerim el terme de «sociabilitats urbanes efímeres» per entendre com es construeix un estar junts alternatiu, fora de marcs institucionals o socials formals. Basant-nos en el treball de camp antropològic d'Anne-Lene Sand, ens centrem en un context en què el desenvolupament de l'espai urbà sembla haver disminuït les oportunitats perquè els joves definisquen i creen espais per a si mateixos. Aquest article se centra en les formes de reunir-se en un context que a primera vista sembla altament regulat i planejat, però que des d'una altra perspectiva és incert (Highmore, 2005; Lefebvre, 1994) i està obert a la reinterpretació lúdica (Stevens, 2007). El material es discuteix a través del concepte de «navegació social» de l'antropòleg danés Henrik Vigh (2006, 2009), per entendre les formacions

socials mòbils i canviants dels joves en el context urbà. Busquem contribuir al coneixement sobre les sociabilitats juvenils urbanes modernes que no poden ser descrites com grupals o territorials, però que en canvi es construeixen a través del desig de trobar-se amb persones afins.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** mobilitat, formacions socials, efímer, comunitats, pràctica social.

## Introduction

This article analyses ephemeral urban socialities through an empirical example in which we investigate how young people construct alternative socialities that are not embedded within an institutional mode of thinking or a formalised social setting. A large part of young people's everyday life in Denmark takes place in institutions. Scandinavian countries have a deeply embedded pedagogical and cultural tradition of providing specialised places for young people (Zeiher, 2001) through associations (Anderson, 2008), youth clubs and public youth activities (Kofod, 2009). In these places, several spatial, temporal and not least social aspects are defined in advance and often by adults, providing fewer possibilities for young people to interpret and negotiate the social space they move in. A common reflection in youth studies literature in the 70s and 80s was that urban space was largely taken over by young people, who were studied in terms of subcultures (Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004) with specific styles (Hebdige, 1979) and analysed through groups identified as working-class boys (Willis, 1977), to name a few. Since the beginning of the 21st century, urban space has attracted much political attention in Scandinavian countries in order to educationalise (Lieberg, 1992), develop and accommodate citizens' future needs (Kortbæk, 2013). According to sociologist Jens Qvortrup (2005), the development of urban space minimises social places that young people can define by and for themselves, and this is especially the case of Danish cities. In this article we focus on the character of the urban, defined as one of the most complex spaces of dynamic interplay between different forces (Highmore, 2005: 141). We pay attention to social construction *by* youth and explore how young people



actually get together in the spatial, temporal and social complexity of urban space. The article aims to answer the following questions: 1) *How do young people socially navigate urban space?* 2) *What characterises the ephemeral socialities young people construct?*

Research on young people in urban contexts tends to focus on creative or expressive manifestations such as street sport (Sand, 2017; Bäckström, 2014), urban exploration (Klausen, 2017), art and performance (Fabian and Samson, 2016) and music (Sand, 2014), to name the most important contributions in the Danish literature. When analysing social formations by youth, by which we mean ephemeral gatherings of young people that cannot be defined as fixed social groups, our intention is not to discuss social categories, hierarchical structures or personal problematics, as is often the case. We step away from the approach of understanding these social formations as *communities*, because as James Paul Gee (2005: 214) problematises, the use of *community* generates discussions of clear-cut social categorisations in terms of who is a member and who is not. Following Gee, we suggest that social constructions should be seen in relation to the *space* young people occupy, in order to comprehend urban complexity. More specifically, this article investigates how young people get together socially in a context that seems to be highly regulated and planned, but that from another perspective is uncertain (Highmore, 2005; Lefebvre, 1991) and open to ludic interpretation (Stevens, 2007).

This article takes an empirical approach and discusses selected empirical material from Sand's doctoral (2014) fieldwork through the lens of Danish anthropologist Henrik Vigh's concept of *social navigation* (Vigh, 2006, 2009). Vigh's perspective offers an understanding of how young people construct mobile and changing social formations in the urban context, which at the end of this article we will discuss as ephemeral socialities. We do not claim ephemeral socialities as a new phenomenon, but conceptually we need to understand the social complexity of the urban from new epistemological perspectives. We illustrate the usefulness of the concept of social navigation to understand the way in which young people navigate the social dynamics of the urban, and argue that urban space has a potential for sociality, if one is able to discover how to navigate the unstable terrain of the urban.



In relation to the current issue, this article contributes to understanding the making of the city beyond institutional framings in the Danish cities of Aarhus and Horsens. This article contributes knowledge about modern urban socialities in medium-sized northern European cities that, in the case of youth formations, cannot be described as groups or as territorial, but that are constructed through the desire to meet with “like-minded individuals”. We deal with the open, negotiated and ephemeral quality of social formations in urban spaces that are not static but constantly changing.

### **Studies on young people and youth sociality in the city**

The work of Michel Maffesoli (1996) sparked academic interest in mobile social movements and contributes to an alternative understanding of social communities and subcultures (Bennett, 1999: 599; Sweetman, 2004: 79-81), concepts that have been widely used in efforts to understand social aspects of youth culture. Andy Bennett critiques the now classic youth studies that analyse youth practices as acts of resistance by class-bound groups, for instance working-class youths (Bennett, 2013). Based on a study of the dance club scene, he states: “those groupings which have traditionally been theorised as coherent subcultures are better understood as a series of temporal gatherings characterised by fluid boundaries and floating memberships” (Bennett, 1999: 600). Following Maffesoli, Martin (2004) advocates a contemporary reconceptualisation of the idea of subcultures and closely reflects on how social order is also about ephemeral social relationships (see Kennelly, 2012: 13) rather than stable and bounded groups.

Maffesoli has been criticised for his neglect of the reflexiveness of young people (Sweetman, 2004: 85-93), which in the 90s was related to the concept of individual self-realisation (Giddens, 1991). By applying the concept of social navigation (Vigh, 2009), we draw attention towards understanding the reflexiveness and spontaneous practices of young people in relation to the way they socially navigate urban space.

*Communities of practice* (Leavey & Wenger, 1998) is another widely-used concept applied to understand groupings and informal social learning.

Although this perspective is practice-orientated and relatively open in definition, the concept of community is not useful to understand the mobility –that is, the processual and relational quality– of social formations and practices. A similar criticism has been raised within anthropological studies since the 90s, starting by questioning whether geographical boundaries delimit social groups with strong and stable ties, a culture, and a sense of belonging (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). Amit (Amit & Rapport, 2002) demonstrates that communities have tended to replace the idea of place-bound cultures to instil an idea of fixity in a complex world. Following her lead, we must go beyond communities as an idea and observe actual mobilised social formations (op. cit.: 4).

One body of literature approaches the presence of young people in urban space – and especially young marginalised men – from the viewpoint of practices of criminalisation by grown-ups, and as forming part of mediatic and political agendas (Cohen, 2011). An example of this treatment can be found in the Spanish literature on youth gangs, especially the Latin Kings (Feixa et al., 2006) and other youth formations that emulate or reject this gang-like representation (Giliberti, 2014; Hakim-Fernández, 2015). Young people's practices are usually seen as forms of resistance and creativity, in line with the abovementioned literature (e. g., Ornelas Márquez, 2016; Murillo i Ribes, 2015). In this article, rather than focusing on their practices in the city as participatory or creative agency, a frequent approach in the literature, we will address the relationships young people construct around these moments of leisure in the city.

On the basis of the epistemological critique raised above, we introduce the concept of social navigation and argue that it is useful in understanding how young people get together in urban space.

### **Theoretical conceptualisations**

Based on fieldwork in Guinea Bissau, Henrik Vigh (2006, 2009, 2010) examines how young people choose to become soldiers in order to gain stability and improve their future possibilities. He translates the concepts developed in that study to urban contexts in the case of young migrants

from Guinea in Lisbon to show how life in the city requires a reading of the unfolding of the everyday.

Mapping and landscape are often used as analytical metaphors for populations and people's social movements in the country or in the city (Crampton, 2009). One criticism of this perspective is that the mapping can appear as stationary and stable. Inspired by anthropologist Fredrik Barth's (2000) notion of *seascape*, Vigh moves beyond understanding social practice as static, hence nuancing the stationary perspective that the metaphor of landscape brings (Vigh, 2009: 420). Vigh relates the concept of navigating to the sea and thereby understands social settings as dynamic and ever-changing. The ocean cannot be defined as distinctly static and limited in physical size.

The concept of *social navigation* aspires to provide an understanding of the connection between the environment and social movement. Vigh argues: "... we organize ourselves and act in relation to the interplay of the social forces and pressures that surround us, and that social navigation designates the practice of moving within a moving environment" (Vigh, 2009: 425). Social navigation makes it possible to understand moving social processes and it is relevant when analysing how natives (in the anthropological sense) navigate within a dynamic everyday life.

Understanding social movements in the city through the notion of social navigation implies more than simply learning how young people interact with the environment. It entails understanding how they orientate, interpret, manoeuvre and define their social spaces in relation to the surrounding social movements (op. cit.: 433).

The strength of this analytical perspective is that it nuances movements and not positions. Human social navigation arises from an awareness of social flow and the changes that affect people's positions or possibilities. The process is therefore more central than the position itself (Vigh, 2006: 93).

Vigh supplements the perspective of social navigation with Michel de Certeau's Marxist notion of *tactic*, which is associated with an anthropological epistemological perspective on *practice*. De Certeau points out that: "... practices of space refer to a specific form of **operations** ('ways of operating')" (de Certeau, 1984: 93, emphasis in original). Tactics are therefore



ways in which people create their own ways of operating. In contrast to strategies, which are planned and have a goal (op. cit: xix), tactics are not rooted in an institution, they are constructed *in situ* and take shape in relation to the sensory, spatial, temporal and social surroundings. The notion of tactics will contribute knowledge about how to navigate more strategically in shifting and fleeting contexts, which are particularly evident in urban space.

Despite the contrasts between a day of war in Bissau, everyday urban life as an undocumented migrant in Lisbon and everyday life in Danish cities such as Aarhus and Horsens, the concept of social navigation is central as an analytical tool, because it stresses the fact that even the latter context is ever-changing where people navigate through uncertainty, in this case by constructing socialities of their own. Aarhus is the second largest city in Denmark and Horsens has 85,000 citizens. Young people in both cities have used places in the periphery, such as behind the railway station or the harbour, and their navigation is related to their general experiences with and reflections on the multiple social urban spaces they go through, and in relation to different social groups. These experiences are given particular emphasis in the interviews, and all the research participants construct contrasts between different social urban spaces. Our reading of the concept of social navigation allows us to understand what informants are looking for within urban space when it is not embedded in an institution, and not centred on age, gender and ethnicity.

## Data and methodological considerations

In her anthropologically-inspired fieldwork in multiple urban contexts (Hannerz, 2003), Sand followed young people over a two-year period between 2011 and 2013. Using methods of participant observation (Spradley, 1980) and visual material such as photographs (Pink, 2007) taken by Sand and the young people themselves, she gained knowledge about their self-organised use of urban space through photo-elicitation (Douglas, 2002), place-interviews (Sin, 2003) and walk-and-talks (Kusenback, 2003). The research participants came from different places in two of Denmark's larger cities, and were chosen because they used and interpreted urban space through music: they hung out listening to music, danced to hard-style music, played music,



and organised festivals, raves, concerts and public parties (*cf.* Sand, 2017). Some of the participants were part of Sand's network, but most of them she observed and met for the first time in the urban space. Thirty-eight people aged between 14 and 38 participated in the fieldwork, one third of whom were girls and the rest boys. Although the participants represented in this article are male, we focus on social navigation and ephemeral socialities instead of gendered cultures.

In her field notes, Sand touched daily upon the question raised by anthropologist James Clifford "Could this be fieldwork?" (1997: 53). The mobile character of the urban field and multiple sites challenged her way of gaining social access. "How was I to gain access in a social field when I was alone?" These reflections led to a methodological strategy of bringing a friend, which legitimised her social attendance, participation and exploration (Castañeda, 2005: 100) in young people's use of urban space.

The fact that the participants' ages ranged from 14 to 38 years old raised the question of whether the project was a youth study. However, instead of operating with what Bourdieu describes as preconstructed research categories (Bourdieu, 1997: 98), as age defines the category of youth, Sand chose to prioritise the study of urban practice, which led to more fluid boundaries and collaboration across ages. Also of note is her methodological decision not to follow one group but to study the way in which different people use different places in different temporalities. This multi-sited methodology has been used by anthropologist Ulf Hannerz in his study of international journalists, and which he describes as follows: "One must establish the translocal linkages, and the interconnections between those and whatever local bundles of relationships which are also part of the study" (Hannerz, 2003: 206). The field is therefore not constructed by geographical borders, but by connections, which also influences the epistemological approach as the concept of social navigation. Sand decided to focus on the use of urban space and the social practices creating it, instead of following the classical anthropological methodology of intensely following a single group of people over time.

## Analysis

The following analysis is divided into two main sections. The first section, *Like-minded individuals in open and flexible urban spaces*, seeks to understand the sense of uncompromising connectedness of the like-minded. The second section, *Navigating with and among others*, analyses how their physical mobility is related to distinctions from others who are not like-minded and even distinctions amongst the like-minded when required by the emergent situations in urban space.

### *Like-minded individuals in open and flexible urban spaces*

Four young men who organise unofficial concerts under a bridge in Aarhus describe the people they intentionally and spontaneously meet with as “like-minded individuals”. In other words, the term *like-minded individuals* is an empirical category, which we use analytically in relation to the concept of social navigation; it is also the basis for investigating what characterises the way they meet and form a sense of togetherness. Their type of togetherness is not a rebellious practice, nor is it constructed through music or style. Instead the research participants identify themselves with other people who practice or “read the city in a similar way”, as one of the research participants describes it.

Villads, a university graduate, is the founder of a self-organised concert club, and today runs one of the city’s main established music venues.

Villads: Even though we were very dedicated, we did not only come for the music. People were introduced to others and we learned to know each other through it [...]. For those who came, it was an active choice. For example, when you go down to the harbour, where the toilet conditions are bad, the beer is warm, the sound is not optimal, the place is crowded and there is no scene, so you cannot see people.

Sand: So what is the appeal?



Villads: It is very appealing to people who want to create something themselves at different levels; whether you played concerts, ran a record company or arranged events [...]. When people met, you hadn't seen it in the newspaper, but you knew a group and were a part of something.

According to Villads, being *like-minded* consists of being a part of something, but they did not meet because of the spatial conformity that often defines a good place. They navigated towards events and places that legitimated a degree of creativity and creation. Villads differentiates between socialities within institutions and socialities constructed within urban space:

Villads: You need someone around who is somehow equal in order to understand who you are [...]. For example, by doing hard-style together with others, you see yourself in others. It's in those moments that you feel connection with others. It [the connection] is generated across places, whether it's at the harbour, in the suburb, hard-style meetups, concerts at Mads's or something different.

Sand: How is it different from schools and institutions?

Villads: That they're contexts that are defined through the foundation of a compromise; at school you are obliged in relation to something else. But these urban contexts are uncompromised. [...]

Villads: I've been trying to tell my parents what I'm doing and they'd like to be interested in it, but they don't understand. But the odd thing is that there is someone who understands it and you do not even have to talk about it, because you sense it when you are there. (Villads, 34 years old).

According to Villads, urban space plays an important role in getting together with like-minded individuals. Why do they not navigate towards predefined contexts, one fixed group of people or places with a certain goal? One response to that may be that these conditions determine how, what, when and where one gets together with others, while, according to Villads, they look for places that do not compromise the social and musical practice and

therefore search for a greater degree of flexibility. Even though they have different interests, Villads explains how he feels a connection with people that use urban space in the same way. Drawing upon Vigh's perspective, when navigating we direct our attention to immediate social flows and the way in which they move and affect us, as well as influence the point we are moving towards (Vigh, 2009: 426). Villads finds it difficult to explain what he specifically navigates towards, but he moves towards a social connectedness among like-minded individuals.

At a Facebook event for a self-organised concert, the organisers write that it is for "People you know – people you don't know", which indicates that the social unpredictability is a waypoint for their social formation. Skateboarders observed who gather at an urban location stated that "We have one rule; everyone shall be able to participate" and at an urban underground environment they characterised themselves as "One big family". They are not obliged to be together in any specific way, but by constructing a social connectedness across time and place they generate a sense of belonging. An interesting aspect is that like-minded individuals are not bound to a specific place, temporality or a durable organisational structure. They navigate towards people who share a similar social reading of urban space. During this analysis we will discuss what it means for everyone to be welcome and for no distinctive treatment to be given to anyone who wants to join in.

### *Navigating with and among others*

Villads mentioned the value he places on being together with people equal to himself. Within this analytical theme we discuss two social categories mentioned by the research participants: social boundaries between like-minded individuals and external social formations in public spaces, and internal boundaries among like-minded individuals.

### *The lamina between "us" and "the others"*

In the photograph (Figure 1), Louise is passing through *the lamina*, which is a metaphor some of the research participants use for the socio-geographical boundary within urban space where some of the research participants enter a

different social sphere. They describe this boundary as a distinction between “us” and “the others”. Several of the people interviewed navigate away from public spaces that are popular, since they will not find like-minded individuals there.



**Figure 1: Louise crossing the lamina. Photo by Sand.**

Claus explains:

Sand: It sounds like it is far away, but it isn't.

Claus: No, it is just another world. They are a different type of people. You know if we walk from my place, pass the kiosk at the end of the street, pass the street to the sidewalk and behind the apartment buildings, there is a gate and there it is, the *lamina*. When we cross that we usually say “Now we enter the lamina, arhhh” [said with a sense of irony]. That is the end, that's where everyone else is, where it's all busy. The other, busyness, the lamina. It is a symbol.



Claus talks about the other social sphere of urban space through an imaginary distance. The “lamina” becomes a symbol for the social space that several young people use as a way of navigating around and distancing themselves from in urban space. The sociologist Richard Jenkins argues that social identity is constructed through social distinctions and the way in which people mark a social or spatial contrast (Jenkins, 2006: 108).

The reason why these young people navigate towards other types of places, situated in the geographical periphery of urban space, is that there is a good chance of meeting like-minded individuals. And this does not imply that they need to see themselves as being the same as other individuals in order to get together with them and find a sense of connection in urban space. Another young man comments, “I know that we are different, but we found a space where we do not see ourselves as different”. This perspective nuances how he navigates and constructs a sociality through social distinctions between *us*, *the others* and *public space*. Connectedness to others with whom they share a similar social reading of urban space does not imply they are committed to a cause beyond the time and space they share together. Hence, this way of navigating away from a specific social space should not be seen as a counterculture, but rather as a tactic for constructing social coherence among like-minded individuals attracted to creative and uncompromised practices in public spaces.

In the following section we illustrate how like-minded individuals produce social readings of practices in urban space and categorise and distinguish themselves from what they describe as “annoying types”.

### **Tactically navigating urban space with others**

While reflecting upon the openness of like-minded individuals, the question arose of whether everyone is welcome within the sociality they are part of. Torsten, who has been organising OPP (Other People’s Property) raves for seven years at abandoned urban locations, explains the following:

If we had anyone that was against the police, when they [the police] came, then we were actually more against them [those who were against the police]



and pushed them away, because we knew that if we didn't it would have consequences for us. When the police saw this was our attitude, then they reacted very differently. (Interview, Torsten, 36 years old).

The essence of the quote is that Torsten and his friends value the possibility of using the urban social space more than the relationship with other like-minded individuals who cross unwritten but important social norms. By maintaining a good relationship with authorities like the police, they retain their rights to a social space they can define and where they can self-organise. This is an example of how good dialogue becomes a tactical way of navigating and manoeuvring socially. Vigh draws upon the concept of *tactics* (de Certeau, 1984: 93), since it reveals how people navigate differently from the way institutions strategically dictate, while at the same time apparently maintaining norms not established by these people in the first place. Tactics nuance how people create their own ways of operating, which are constructed *in situ* and take shape in relation to the sensory, spatial, temporal and social surroundings. Strategies are planned ahead, but due to the cyclical (Lefebvre, 2004) and uncertain terrain of urban space, the like-minded need to construct their own tactical operations in order to maintain a space where they can be with other like-minded individuals. Even though OPP events have been run over several years, the structuring of the event should be understood as tactics, and not a strategy, since it is a bottom-up-system, which is not institutionalised and is sensitive and changeable in relation to the surrounding social and physical environment.

The socio-geographical boundaries mentioned above are actually mobile and adaptable to circumstances. Not everyone understands the social logics and the tactical ways of operating or has figured out how to navigate the boundaries between what is legal and illegal. Based on a social reading of the power relations and dynamics of urban space, Torsten, and his friends who organise the events, take bad behaviour into consideration by dividing the like-minded into two subcategories: the like-minded who understand the social logic and importance of tactical social navigation, and the like-minded who do not understand these ways of operating. A dynamic boundary-making based on shared understandings is an intersubjective process that allows for



alternative systems of classification such as the ones these youths establish with respect even to other like-minded individuals (Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

Daniel, Sebastian, Matias and Kristian, who arrange unofficial concerts under a bridge in Aarhus, explain that they go away if “annoying types” show up and they are either too drunk or behave inappropriately. “Clearly, if the mood is destroyed, then we will move on to a new place, and they can sit there by themselves”. Good atmosphere becomes essential to their way of navigating among the like-minded and places in urban space. This demonstrates how good atmosphere becomes a social orientation that is prioritised above being together with like-minded individuals who they do not think contribute constructively to their social practice. Therefore, they do not define their sociality territorially, but dissolve territorial boundaries by moving on to a new place. According to sociologist Erving Goffman, the often static understanding of territories as where interaction occurs must be redefined. Instead of talking about territories that can be defined and defended, Goffman is concerned with how territories can be expressed through bodily markers and defined by changing social situations. Applying a more mobile perspective, Goffman argues that some territories are organised as fixed, while others are situational and extend over limited time spans of minutes or hours (Goffman, 2004: 337). Returning to Vigh, the changing nature of socio-geographical boundaries for the research participants is an illustration of how tactics must be adapted to a potentially changing context (Vigh, 2009: 431).

Movement is an important characteristic of social formations in urban seascapes, as we have seen how these social formations need not be fixed in a particular territory or even happen while bodies are fixed, as the next example shows. The following extract is from Sand’s field notes on her observations of several children, young people and adults skating in a schoolyard one evening:

Two boys around 12 years of age skate around the obstacles that surround me. The first boy passes me and approaches the other boy by skating by while saying “What is your last name?” The second boy does not stop but turns his head and says his full name. The first boy replies “Are you on Facebook? Then I will find you there.” “Yes” the second boy replies.

The dialogue lasted less than 30 seconds and exemplifies how social cohesion can be established within short temporalities and in movement. The



fleeting interaction happening before an observer's eyes is significant of a certain reflexiveness, shown through a specific know-how. For these boys, and for several of the research participants, Facebook makes it possible to establish contact across time and space, which is a contemporary way of navigating urban space.

Based on the empirical analysis of the social navigation among Danish youth, the aim of the following discussion is to interrogate how we can understand the way in which young people navigate socially in a broader perspective and what this type of social formation tells us about young people and the inherent potential of urban space.

## Discussion

### *Ephemeral socialities: mobility and unpredictability*

The analysis of how young people get together and navigate socially shows that they do not navigate towards a specific place or predefined sociality. They share a reading of the dynamic character of the urban, which constitutes a source of connectedness among them. Sociologist John Urry's understanding of mobility is based on a social geographical perspective. He argues:

...social relationship should be seen as involving diverse 'connections' that are more or less 'at a distance', more or less fast, more or less intense and more or less involving physical movement. Social relations are never only fixed or located in place but are to very varying degrees constituted through 'circulating entities' (Urry, 2007: 46).

Urry characterises social relationships as connections that operate mentally and physically. Not all young people like or even manage to navigate socially within a space characterised by instability, risk and multiple socialities (Sand, 2015). Not only do the young people represented in this article navigate with and within a moving space, they also construct social unpredictability. In other words, physical mobility and their interactions with other



people and the urban space are an important aspect of how urban space is read and created by the research participants. The way in which they situate spatial mobility is in this case a strategy to maintain these spaces. Why is this so? Multiple examples illustrate this conclusion: the way in which they do not rely on territory; how they navigate with few social rules and a high degree of tolerance in order to welcome social diversity; how they search for spaces loosely defined in terms of use. They choose to situate unpredictability even though it increases social risk (*cf.* Franck & Stevens, 2007: 28).

Vigh mentions the metaphor of the game used by Bourdieu, who, according to Vigh, understands social fields as rather stable and fixed despite his relational approach. He suggests we shift this understanding from “[...] an image of people interacting with each other on a field” to people who “interact with each other *and* the field” (Vigh, 2010: 427, emphasis added). According to Vigh, the changing field and the people should be considered coherent and dialectically positioned, emphasising the spatial dimension of socialities. We argue that young people interact with urban space, and this interaction provides opportunities to meet in ways that they do not find possible in institutional or formalised everyday places. They redefine the way society and formalised institutions situate them through categories such as age, gender, ethnicity, social rules and hierarchies. If their practices took place within public institutions, they would not have the same freedom of social and spatial interpretation and would in a way be pre-positioned in the relational space through those categories. Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2001) suggest removing the assumption that any collective is inevitably defined as a “group”. They define connectedness as “the relational ties that link people” (*op. cit.*: 20), that is, as relational instead of categorical, because it is based on affinity and not categories such as age, ethnicity and class as they are institutionally defined. Along this line, we suggest applying the idea of *mobile connectedness*, which implies the possibility of looser ties and motives for getting together ephemerally.

Social formations such as the ephemeral socialities explored in this article cannot be called youth groups, but this does not mean they are not organised. Lanzara (1983) focused on what he calls ephemeral social organisations after an earthquake by contrasting them to stable and often bureaucratic organisa-



tions such as the army or NGOs. *Ephemerality* underscores the qualities of dynamicity and adaptability, and it refers to a temporally short form of organisation in an unstable field that forces people to interact with different actors. This approach highlights more instant, and often marginalised, socialities (op. cit.: 72) that nevertheless seem to read social environments more directly than larger and more stable organisations. We argue that this analysis of ephemeral organisations inspired by catastrophic situations, such as an earthquake and the distress and hardship it generates, can be applied to other, more everyday social situations such as young people's need to find open and creative urban places. These youths interact with urban space and other people, and we argue that this way of navigating socially constructs *ephemeral socialities* that are bound to mobile practices and short temporalities.

Facebook is used in the contexts discussed in this analysis as a tool for relationship maintenance and management (Baym, 2011), as seen in the example developed by Humphrey (2010). It would be interesting to expand the analysis further to include the relationship between the production of space (Lefebvre, 1991), loosely structured ties among young people and the social media they use to “micro-coordinate [...] joint activities on the fly” (Baym, 2011), which now more than ever before happen through technologies such as mobile phones connected to the internet.

## Conclusion

Based on anthropological fieldwork and empirical material generated within Danish cities, this article has explored the way in which young people get together within a space not embedded within an institution or formalised social setting. Drawing upon Danish anthropologist Henrik Vigh's perspective of social navigation, the article aimed to understand the dialectic relationship between the character of the urban and the tactics needed to manoeuvre socially. Through their social navigation, young Danish people search for other “like-minded individuals” while questioning and playing with the way many citizens, politicians, architects, educators and teachers think and design places for young people. They tactically locate unpredictability and construct a space for alternative socialities. We have argued that young people con-



struct social formations in urban space and, due to their mobile character and short temporalities, we describe these as ephemeral socialities. The urban is a space where young people can get together in ephemeral social formations and where they define how, when and with whom they meet. We call for further exploration of ephemeral socialities and draw attention to how they might nuance the way in which we understand informal learning, social organisational structures, and concepts of citizenship and the right to the city.

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Figure 1: Louise crossing the lamina.